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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000112

SIPDIS

CENTCOM FOR POLAD

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SUBJECT: SCIRI PARLIAMENTARIAN SAYS SPARE THE ROD, SPOIL THE SUNNI ARAB

Classified By: POL Couns Robert Ford, reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: SCIRI TNA member and influential imam Sheikh Jalal al Dien al Sagheer told PolCouns in a January 11 meeting that some Iraqi Shia are contemplating secession from Iraq in frustration over the continued security problems and terror attacks. Others are wondering whether they should take up arms against Sunni Arabs, MNF-I, or both. He said the Embassy's Sunni Arab outreach plan was ignoring moderate Sunni Arabs and promoting extremists, adding that the use of force is the best way to solve the Sunni Arab-backed insurgency. Sheikh Sagheer also expressed his support for MOI Bayan Jabr, saying that Jabr cannot be expected to reform the ministry, as it has been riddled with corrupt officials since the fall of Saddam. PolCouns countered that stabilizing security required both political and security approaches and urged the Shia Islamist list support a national unity government that would be accountable to all Iraqis. Sagheer has a real following on the street, and his remarks indicate our relations with the Shia Islamists will become bumpier in the coming months. END SUMMARY.

What Is On The Minds of Shia Malcontents?

12. (C) Sagheer said that he has received many e-mails from Shia telling him they favor seceding from the rest of Iraq and setting up a separate Shia state. Others would like to see Iraq turn into a loose confederation. Both views reflect growing discontent with the state of Iraqi affairs, and the desire of many Shia to isolate themselves from Sunni Arabs and Kurds.

13. (C) Even more worrying, Sagheer said, are the e-mails he claimed to have received from Shia who question whether they should take up arms and fight MNF-I and/or Sunni Arabs. Sagheer said the some Shia feel both MNF-I and Sunni Arabs support terror and are destabilizing Iraq. Such feelings are fueling a move toward civil war. Sagheer said, however, that the Shia will not fight unless they are told to, and Grand Ayatollah Sistani, along with most other imams, so far has opposed such a confrontation. He did warn, however, that he and some other imams are not able to fully control the Shia street. Some of the young faithful at his Baratha mosque have told him his words are "morphine": hard and comforting but ultimately not changing the surrounding reality. PolCouns noted that Sistani and the Shia religious leadership had exercised great patience. The U.S. had noticed and appreciated this. It was important, he stressed, not to fall in Zarqawi's trap. A unity government would help ensure that each side in Iraq felt its most vital interests are protected.

Sunni Arab Outreach Does More Harm Than Good

14. (C) Sagheer lumped the mainline Sunni Arab political leaders and Zarqawi all together. He criticized the Embassy's Sunni Arab outreach efforts, saying that it ignores moderate Sunni Arabs and promotes extremists. He said that the Sunni Arabs with whom the Embassy has been meeting have never fully supported the democratic process. This has lead to more violence. Furthermore, even when Sunni Arab groups such as the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) campaigned in favor of the constitution, they never really supported it. It would be better to support moderates like Nuri Rawi and Saadun Dulaymi who eventually can convince the Sunni Arab community to cease violence and join the political process. PolCouns commented that last-minute IIP support, not support from Nuri Rawi or Saadun Dulaymi, probably secured the margin of passage for the draft constitution in the Ninewa referendum on October 15. PolCouns underlined that the Embassy has consistently told Sunni Arabs to renounce violence and stop supporting the insurgency even while we urge them to participate in the political process. He emphasized to Sagheer that we have warned the Sunni Arabs that the fighting Iraq's elected, legitimate government will be an illegitimate act and we will label it terrorism. (Comment: Sagheer seemed unimpressed. End Comment.)

15. (C) Sagheer said that the Shia could solve the problem of the Sunni-backed insurgency by killing many of the Sunni Arabs involved in it. There is, however, a political program for Iraq, and the Shia are patiently following it. The Shia have, for the most part, been peaceful.

Apologia for Bayan Jabr

16. (C) Sagheer argued that the U.S. is wrong to criticize MOI Bayan Jabr. First, Jabr has little room for maneuver in the ministry because there are many bad elements, including some Baathists working there since the fall of Saddam Hussein. (He blamed post-Saddam Interior Ministers Nuri Badran, Samir Sumaidai'e and Felah Naqib - all Sunni Arabs - for introducing these bad elements despite Shia warnings.) Jabr does not wish to violate human rights. He simply cannot exercise complete control over the ministry. Second, the U.S. should not criticize Jabr for the abuse of prisoners who, once released, commit more crimes and acts of terror against Iraqis. It is better to execute one hundred criminals publicly and deter future terror, he opined. PolCouns observed that it was important that the one hundred executed are real criminals and had not merely confessed under torture (here, for once, Sagheer agreed). He cautioned that Interior Ministry practices are causing resentment and fear in the Sunni Arab community and helping the insurgency recruit. PolCouns noted that the Iraqi Government could at least conduct a real investigation into cases like the Jadriya bunker, something it has thus far failed to do.

17. (C) COMMENT: Sagheer has been a long-time and often acerbic Embassy interlocutor. He was especially unhappy because he had received information via sources in the Iraqi Defense Ministry that the U.S. military was planning to raid his mosque - something he calmly but deliberately warned against. There was little give in his position: Iraq's number one problem is Sunni Arab terrorism, and that problem has to be fixed, even with harsh means if necessary. He also made clear he anticipates and rejects American pressure on behalf of the Sunni Arabs in the future government negotiations. The Baratha mosque has a strong following, and Sagheer is one of the more influential clerics in the SCIRI party. His remarks indicate we can expect our relations with the Shia Islamists to become bumpier in the coming months. END COMMENT.
SATTERFIELD